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ARE COWBOYS KILLING THE WEST?

BY JIM ROBBINS

One of today's angriest environmental battles pits Western tradition against a new breed of conservationist. At stake: control of taxpayer-owned land in 11 states. The tangled trail starts here.

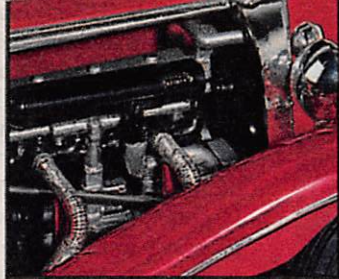


damage than any other activity. The whole show has been subsidized by U.S. taxpayers to the tune of \$150 million each year. The anti-ranching battle cry is: "Cattle-Free by '93."

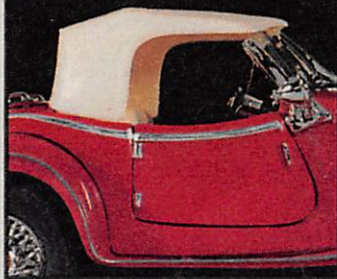
A ranching tradition

One skirmish in the war between cattle ranchers and environmentalists is taking place in Catron County, New Mexico's largest county in area, with 7,800 square miles of mountains and meadows on the state's western edge.

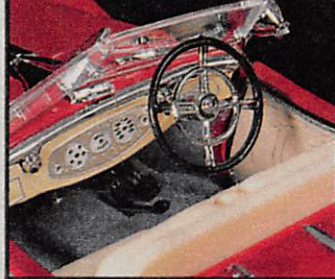
Cattle outnumber people here by a ratio of 15-to-1. This is broad, sweeping country, with vistas that roll away to distant horizons. Ponderosa pines and Utah junipers cover the hillsides. It is high desert, with just 14 inches of rainfall a year. What are called "rivers" here would be "creeks" elsewhere. Mountain lions, black bears, coyotes, deer and elk prowl the canyons and mountains. Ninety percent of the land is owned by the U.S. government, part



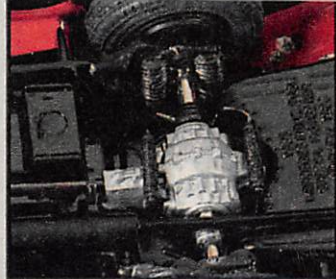
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At the foot of a steep dun-colored bluff on a sunny day along New Mexico's Tularosa Creek, Charlie McCarty stops his pickup truck. Pushing back his hat, he points to a small log cabin with a stone chimney tucked within a grove of oak trees. "My grandfather homesteaded the ranch here," he says.

McCarty inherited this sprawling ranch about 165 miles southwest of Albuquerque, in the rocky, rugged terrain of New Mexico's San Francisco Mountains. He also inherited a basic part of the American dream: the life of a range-riding cowboy.

But an increasing number of people consider the cowboy and his grass-munching cattle a nightmare. Jim Fish, a New Mexico environmentalist and hunter, is one of them. "We need an end to all public lands ranching," he says. "We can't tolerate their political, economic or ecological abuse anymore." Decades of overgrazing has



NO: *"All environmentalists do is fatten lawyers," says rancher Charlie McCarty. His cattle graze public land, which, some argue, should be reserved for wildlife.*

forced out hungry wildlife, threatened endangered species, ruined streams and turned large tracts of once-rich range into wasteland, Fish says. "They screwed it up. Now get them out."

At issue are 268 million acres of land in 11 Western states. The land is owned by taxpayers, leased for grazing by ranchers and managed by the federal government. While ranchers lease grassland to feed cattle and sheep, this

sweeping expanse of public lands — an area the size of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa and West Virginia combined — is open for other uses such as camping, hunting, hiking and wildlife watching. Local and national environmental groups — supported in their claims by scientific studies — say that cattle have annihilated these wide-open spaces and that grazing has done more

of the Gila (HE-la) National Forest.

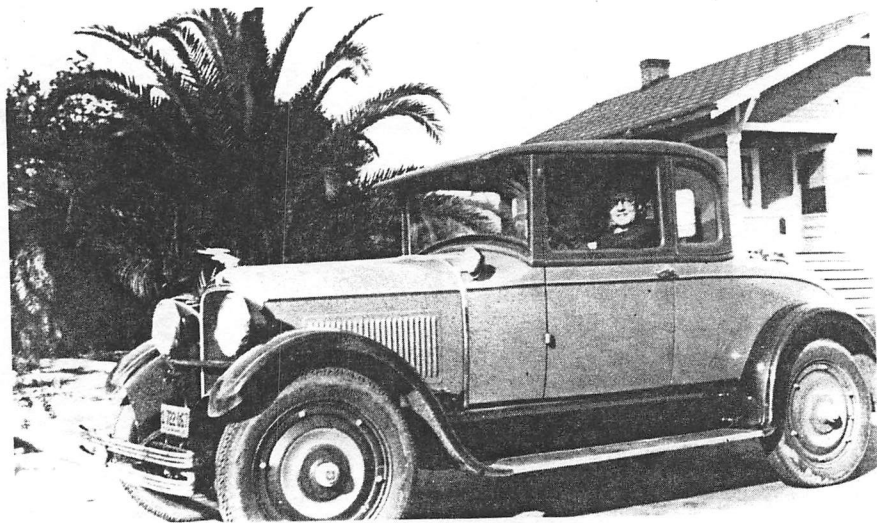
In the middle of the county sits the town of Reserve. With a population of 439 or so, it's Catron's largest town and the county seat. Pickup trucks — the vehicles of choice — are parked in front of houses scattered along two-lane State Highway 12. Just out of town, the San Francisco and Negrito rivers — small, meandering streams lined with gnarly cottonwood trees — merge.

Reserve was once a logging town, but the sole remaining sawmill closed last year. Now the grocery store, gas stations, restaurants and a handful of other businesses cater mostly to tourists and ranchers. One of those businesses is Charlie's Supply, a hardware store just a half-mile east of town. It is owned by rancher McCarty and is next to his modest home on the family ranch. The store is a necessity, McCarty says, and exemplifies how the ranch economy has changed. "Everyone still hanging onto a ranch has found a way to feed it with outside money. A cow just don't make the money."

McCarty walks outside, away from the crescent wrenches and nail pullers,

Jim Robbins has reported on the environment for National Public Radio and "The New York Times." He is writing a book on the changing West, to be published by William Morrow & Co.

Photographed by Max Aguilera-Hellweg



This was Studebaker car I had to cover my district.